

Introduction

Sartre at One Hundred—a Man of the Nineteenth Century Addressing the Twenty-First?

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We are celebrating the centennial year of the birth of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). His death and the huge funeral cortege that spontaneously gathered on that occasion marked the passing of the last of the philosophical “personalities” of our era. Contrast, for example, his departure, which I did not witness, with that of Michel Foucault, which I did. The latter was acknowledged in a modest ceremony at the door of the Salpêtrière Hospital; his private funeral in the province was even more stark. The two passings exhibit the distinction graphically. Foucault, the most likely candidate to become Sartre’s successor as reigning intellectual on the Left Bank, exited the institution that had figured in several of his books attended by a small crowd of a couple hundred, admittedly assembled without public notification, on a damp morning to hear Gilles Deleuze read a brief passage from the preface to *The Uses of Pleasure*. Describing philosophy as “the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself,” the message had an ironically haunting Sartrean ring.¹

Though Sartre and Foucault shared a common intellectual heritage—both had attended prestigious lycées in Paris, Sartre almost from the start and Foucault as a young man from the provinces, preparing for the national exams to gain entrance to the Ecole Normale Supérieure to which each was admitted—there was a marked generational difference between them, as well as a strong philosophical divergence. Winston Churchill’s famous quip (that the British and the Americans are two peoples separated by a common language) could be applied similarly to Sartre and Foucault. On more than one occasion, Foucault mentioned the Husserlian heritage that he and others shared with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. But he insisted that whereas the latter pair focused on experience, meaning (*sens*), and the subject, Foucault and his intellectual colleagues looked toward a philosophy

of knowledge (*savoir*), rationality, and the concept—two schools of philosophical thought separated by a common Husserlian legacy.²

I mention Foucault not only to serve as a foil for illuminating the contrasting work of Sartre, but to gain access to a door on Sartre's thought and work that Foucault can be seen to have both closed and later reopened. I take their relationship as indicative of the "official" reading of Sartrean existentialism by the next generation of Parisian intellectuals. Not all, of course, but enough of the Left Bank "nomenclatura" quickly paid Sartre the questionable homage of silence in the decades following his demise. One outspoken exception was Louis Althusser, whose autobiography is especially vitriolic in his dismissal of Sartre: "I always thought that Sartre, though a brilliant mind and the author of wonderful 'philosophical novels' such as *L'Être et le néant* and *Critique de la raison dialectique*, never really understood anything of Hegel, Marx, or, needless to say, Freud. At best, I saw him as one of those post-Cartesian and post-Hegelian 'philosophers of history' whom Marx detested."³

Another exception to this conspiracy of silence is Foucault, though significantly most of his sharp remarks occurred during Sartre's lifetime. In a recent issue of the intellectual monthly *Critique*, Robert Redeker notes that the entire first volume of Foucault's four-volume *Dits et écrits*, covering the years 1954 to 1969, "echoes with the thunder of his rivalry with Sartre."⁴ While Sartre remains the best-known philosopher of the twentieth century (based on opinion polls), with his name having become a household word, his very popularity—in an assessment all too familiar to academics—is seen as a sign of superficiality. How can you take seriously someone whose phone number even the charwomen carry with them!⁵

Expressing a widespread view among philosophers of the next generation, Foucault, in an interview with Didier Eribon (1981), is recorded as remarking: "[T]he first pages of Sartre's *Flaubert* are unreadable because of five or ten pages on language that were seventy-five years late, ignorant of what linguistics had discovered."⁶ So Foucault closes the door on the kind of philosophy that Sartre had been doing, namely, "existentialism," to encapsulate in a word the object of his disdain. As he puts it in a particularly severe dismissal: "The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is the magnificent and pathetic attempt by a man of the nineteenth century to think the twentieth century. In that sense, Sartre is the last Hegelian and, I would say, the last Marxist."⁷

Aside from being a Hegelian and a Marxist, on this account, what is it that locks Sartre in the nineteenth century? Is it his much-maligned philosophy of consciousness, his lingering Cartesianism? Could it be his fascination with nineteenth-century authors such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and, above all, Flaubert? Should we cite his multi-volume Flaubert study, which Sartre described as "a novel that is true" but which a French Flaubert scholar recently redescribed as "a true novel"? Or perhaps it is his yearning for "the Revolution" that, arguably, reached its nostalgic flame-out in the "Events of May" 1968? That "shock" (*l'ébranlement*) has been described as Sartrean social philosophy in praxis. To close but scarcely terminate the list of complaints against Sartre, it has been observed that what is most personally at issue between Foucault and

Sartre is their respective conceptions of the intellectual, Sartre propounding what Foucault rejects as the ideal of a “total” or “universal” intellectual and Foucault offering as his alternative the “specific intellectual.” Let us examine this last entry in the brief against Sartre more closely, for in many ways it distills the other criticisms mounted by the generation of French thinkers that came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s.

Sartre as Universal Intellectual

Sartre formulates his idea of an intellectual in a trio of conferences delivered in Japan in September and October 1965.⁸ Published together as *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels*,⁹ these three lectures address such questions as “What is an intellectual? What is the function of the intellectual? Is the writer (*l'écrivain*) an intellectual?” The format resembles his famous collection of essays, *What Is Literature?* But the content is closer to that of his still unpublished Rome Lecture, which had been delivered the year before.¹⁰ We find in these lectures to the Japanese the usual existentialist criticism of bourgeois humanism and the characteristic Sartrean appeal to the work of art as the model for non-alienating communication among freedoms. But concepts from his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* such as praxis, class struggle, the singular universal, and dialectical relations themselves are now emphasized.

Drawing from his critics, Sartre arrives at the following common charge against the intellectual: “The intellectual is someone who gets involved in what doesn’t concern him and who pretends to contest a collection of received truths and the conduct that they inspire in the name of a global conception of man and of society. But such a conception, these critics argue, is impossible ... because developing societies are defined by the extreme diversification of modes of life, of social functions and of concrete problems” (*Situations* 8:377). In a word, the intellectual is trying, in an Aristotelian manner (or better, in the manner of the German Aristotle), to understand the many through the one, when the preferred mode should be what Foucault calls a “polyhedron of intelligibility.”¹¹

Sartre counters with an example: the people who built the atomic bomb. They should be called “scientists” (*savants*) but not “intellectuals.” Indicating the politico-ethical condition that he ascribes to this term, Sartre explains that they would qualify as “intellectuals” if they left their fields of expertise, made use of the authority their scientific reputations accorded them in order to oppose political actions in terms of other principles that they put into play, and did so “in the name of a system of eminently contestable values that take human life as their supreme norm” (*Situations* 8:378–379). In other words, the Sartrean intellectual relies on the fulcrum of his particular expertise to move the rock of institutionalized injustice with the normative lever of “human life.”

If this sounds suspiciously like the kind of appeal to human nature that Sartre has regularly rejected (that is, the idea of nature as norm), it would be better to liken “human life” to the concept of the “complete human” (*l'homme*

intégral) that emerges in his Rome Lecture as the model for socio-ethical reform.¹² In both cases, we are dealing with what I have called elsewhere a “value image” à la Scheler rather than a nomological concept à la Kant.¹³ This interpretation resonates better with the major role of imaging consciousness in Sartre’s thought.¹⁴

It is worth noting that Foucault, in describing the “specific” intellectual, uses the same example of the atomic physicist, specifically, J. Robert Oppenheimer, who objects to the use to which his work is being put (in this case, the building of the atomic bomb), and does so in the name of humanity. In other words, the intellectual for both Sartre and Foucault employs his professional standing to defend determinate human values endangered by his society or the organization with which he is associated. One is reminded of Jonas Salk’s pacifism, of Sartre and Russell’s International War Crimes Tribunal, or, for that matter, of Sartre and Foucault’s support of the Vietnamese boat people. These intellectuals used their fame (what Sartre called the “star system”) to further the cause of human dignity and social justice.

But let us pursue Sartre’s concept of the “true” intellectual, an offensive notion to some of his critics, to determine what there is about it that is properly “existentialist.” For Sartre, the “false” intellectual is a compromiser. This is the person who in the face of an opposing opinion responds “yes, but,” or who cautions that “one cannot take sides.” This ideal of detachment and “objectivity” is a function of analytic reason that, Sartre has insisted since the *Critique*, is bourgeois in its blindness to dialectical relations and hence to socio-economic class. Exhibiting the well-known category of bad faith, the false intellectual is a kind of “technician of practical knowledge (*savoir*).” As such, he is divided against himself and exists in a state of “unhappy consciousness.” As Sartre explains:

The intellectual is someone who becomes aware of the opposition both within himself and in his society, between the search for practical truth (with all the norms it implies) and a ruling ideology (with its system of traditional values). Although this new awareness must, *in order to be real*, operate in the case of the intellectual, *first and foremost* at the level of his professional activities and functions, it is nothing other than an unmasking of the fundamental contradictions of that society: that is to say, the struggle between classes and within the dominant class itself, the organic conflict between the myths, values and traditions with which it seeks to infect other classes in order to ensure its hegemony.¹⁵

The true intellectual, in Sartre’s reading, is the “singular universal,” though, as we know from his Flaubert study, not all singular universals are true intellectuals, Flaubert himself being a case in point. The true intellectual “incarnates,” dialectically speaking, the objective contradictions of his society in a concrete, totalizing action that both raises the consciousness of the agent himself and advances the contradictory situation, if only by exacerbating it, in what Sartre calls an “event” (*Situations* 8:407; *BEM* 251). One can see how an anti-Hegelian like Foucault or a “structuralist” Marxist like Althusser might find repugnant Sartre’s characterization of the true intellectual as a blending of Hegelian “unhappy consciousness” and Marxist class consciousness.

In appealing to “human life” and criticizing bourgeois humanism, Sartre sets before us an ideal of what the integral human *can* be. It is not an essence to be actualized but the result of a creative choice: “The human universal is *yet to come* [*à faire*]” (*Situations* 8:410; *BEM* 253). When it is a matter of “the city of ends,” as he sometimes says, or the realization of positive reciprocity among fully free, organic individuals-in-relation, Sartre warns us that no pattern, no recipe for its achievement is possible. The very criterion of success, he implies, emerges from the advent of such a society of freedoms. As he asserts in *Search for a Method*: “As soon as there will exist *for everyone* a margin of *real* freedom beyond the production of life, Marxism will have lived out its span; a philosophy of freedom will take its place. But we have no means, no intellectual instrument, no concrete experience which allows us to conceive of this freedom or of this philosophy.”¹⁶ Admittedly, he is proposing a gamble, not unlike the Marxian wager that human “nature” will change qualitatively as the material conditions of history advance. This optimism strikes many people as blind faith. Yet for others, it is a risk worth taking once the present situation has become, as Foucault would say, “intolerable.”

In this respect, I am reminded of Kierkegaard’s famous “leap,” which MacIntyre and others have criticized as a form of “criterionless choice.” I think they overlook the context in which Kierkegaard presents this option. Whether it concerns the vacillating aesthete facing the moral challenge of Judge William or the anguished Patriarch weighing the authenticity of the command he has just received, the model, I suggest, is not a blind leap or a criterionless choice. Rather, it is a *conversion experience*—an illuminating leap, a *criterion-constituting* choice. Without getting into the psychology of conversion experiences, whether religious, ethical, political, or life-orienting in some other sense (such as, perhaps, the experience of “falling” in love), conversion as a criterion-constituting choice is at least a hypothesis worth considering. This suggestion is especially pertinent in view of Sartre’s claim in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* that “we can conceive an absolute conversion to intersubjectivity. This conversion,” he explains, “is *ethical*. It presupposes a political and social conjuncture (suppression of classes and of the State) as its necessary condition, but [he warns] this suppression is not sufficient by itself.”¹⁷ Of course it is not, for a basic thesis of Sartrean existentialism in its later, “Marxian” phase is that “the men history makes are never entirely those needed to make History.”¹⁸ Elsewhere, Sartre speaks of such a necessary conversion but admits that such a mass conversion is unlikely.¹⁹

The upshot of this brief analysis of the Sartrean intellectual is that he resembles Foucault’s specific intellectual in the use of his authority in a particular field to counter intolerable social conditions or programs that are not precisely his *métier*. But Sartre’s concept does shift into the realm of Foucault’s “universal” intellectual when it employs standard Marxist terminology and dialectical reason to effect this commitment. In other words, the committed intellectual of existentialist fame loses much of his appeal when the conceptual framework—the “ideology,” if you will—for this project is dialectical.

The Future of Marxist Existentialism

Returning to the title of this essay, can existentialism inherit the historical dialectic in the twenty-first century that various forms of Marxism seem to have relinquished toward the end of the twentieth? In other words, does the future of existentialism lie in its alliance with philosophical Marxism or with dialectical thinking more broadly conceived? Or must one look elsewhere for its continued relevance?

One matter is clear: existentialism, if it is to be more than a “coffee-table” curiosity or a romanticized version of bourgeois individualism, requires a social theory and, I would argue, though not here, a social ontology on which to base its claims. To that extent, I believe that Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, despite its prolixity, is the underrated vehicle for conveying existentialist insights and values into the new millennium. What I have in mind are its basic concepts such as *praxis*, *practico-inert*, *seriality*, and *mediating third*. These serve to preserve individual moral responsibility in the midst of seemingly impersonal, necessary systems and institutions. As our society becomes more globalized, our economy more transnational, and our identities more cosmopolitan, the ethical and the political concepts of individual responsibility grow increasingly compromised. And while the image of the solitary drinker in the Left Bank café has come to typify the vintage existentialist of the post-World War II generation, this is but a facet and a phase of the larger picture of existentialism as a living, evolving philosophy of life that is increasingly aware of its social responsibility.

But the current disaffection of intellectuals with historical Marxism carries over into its “totalitarian” tendencies, including the intellectual totalitarianism of “a single cause/explanation for History as a whole,” namely, material scarcity and/or class warfare. This may be an aspect of Sartre’s later philosophy that will not withstand twenty-first-century scrutiny. Sartre was, arguably, a political anarchist (“libertarian socialist” was the received term in France at the time). Perhaps he should have been more of an epistemological anarchist (recall Foucault’s “polyhedron of intelligibility” or Paul Feyerabend’s freewheeling theses in the philosophy of science in the 1960s). If his famous “choice” of rationalities were increased to more than the two he considers—namely, analytical reason and dialectical reason—this could well foster the pragmatic spirit of the current age.

Part of the difficulty is the “dialectic” itself. In its Hegelian-Marxist forms it has not shown itself to be a mere heuristic, a Wittgensteinian ladder that one uses and casts off. Rather than a ladder, these dialectics resemble flypaper or an electric fence that one grasps and cannot escape. Sartre himself has spoken of the need for a more “supple” dialectic and a “dialectic with holes in it” (NE 459), those holes being the contingencies of human freedom and the counter-productive nature of the practico-inert. Indeed, in the late 1940s, he even speaks of *otherness* as “the true motor principle of History” and as being “broader than the dialectic and encompass[ing] it. The dialectic,” he continues, “is one *species* of otherness” (NE 56). The very “othering” character of human consciousness, its alterity, he seems to imply, makes dialectic possible even as it resists its totalizing power.²⁰

The Return to Experience

Let me turn to another topic that linguistically oriented philosophers have tended to leave for phenomenologists, whether Husserlian or Hegelian, and others, namely, “experience.” Recall that Foucault had contrasted his stress on concept with the emphasis on experience that marked the path in Husserl’s thought that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty chose to follow. Sartrean existentialism is a philosophy of consciousness that gradually thickened into a philosophy of experience. Because the notion of experience shows signs of regaining a central place in contemporary French thought, let us see whether Sartre’s use of the concept might meet the needs of philosophers in the twenty-first century, that is, in a post-poststructuralist age.

A basic thesis that I have defended over the years is that Sartre broke the conceptual logjam that had blocked his constructing a satisfactory social theory when he moved from a philosophy of consciousness to one of praxis.²¹ Though consciousness remained operative in his subsequent works, it metamorphosed into “lived experience” (*le vécu*), assuming functions commonly ascribed to the Freudian unconscious, which he continued to reject in name. Thus, in an interview given in 1969, Sartre admits:

I do not believe in the unconscious in the form in which psychoanalysis presents it to us. In my present book on Flaubert, I have replaced my earlier notion of consciousness (although I still use the word a lot), with what I call *le vécu*—lived experience. I will try to describe in a moment what I mean by this term, which is neither the precautions of the preconscious, nor the unconscious, nor consciousness, but the terrain in which the individual is perpetually overflowed by himself and his riches and consciousness plays the trick of determining itself by forgetfulness. (*BEM* 39)

As always, Sartre is intent on preserving individual responsibility. But now the ontological basis of these ascriptions is what we may call the “primacy of praxis.” The epistemic and moral ground of such responsibility is “comprehension,” which Sartre describes as “the translucidity of praxis to itself.”²² Plenty of room is left in this terminology for “bad faith” (for example, the “trick of determining oneself by forgetfulness” or selective recollection), as well as for the play of ideology.²³ Though objective conditions play an increasingly important role in his later thought, Sartre never regards us as the passive objects of abstract structures and impersonal forces. Even in this more nuanced account, his early existentialist shibboleth continues to hold true: “We are without excuse.”

This “translucidity” (as distinct from “transparency”) of praxis allows for ideological self-deception, such as the form that infects the “false” intellectual, thanks to a kind of awareness, namely, “comprehension,” that is more profound than “knowledge.” Where Freudian psychoanalysis invokes the unconscious, Sartrean existential psychoanalysis appeals to comprehension. This is most evident in his study of Flaubert. Describing the moments of self-awareness that occasionally pierced the fog of self-deception in Flaubert’s writings, Sartre observes:

For me, these formulations define the relationship which Flaubert had with what is ordinarily called the unconscious, and what I would call a total absence of knowledge, but a real comprehension. I distinguish here between comprehension and intellection: there can be intellection of a practical conduct, but only comprehension of a passion. What I call *le vécu*—lived experience—is precisely the ensemble of the dialectical process of psychic life, in so far as this process is obscure to itself because it is a constant totalization, thus necessarily a totalization which cannot be conscious of what it is. One can be conscious of an external totalization, but one cannot be conscious of a totalization which also totalizes consciousness. ‘Lived experience,’ in this sense, is perpetually susceptible of comprehension but never of knowledge. Taking it as a point of departure, one can know certain psychic phenomena by concepts, but not this experience itself. The highest form of comprehension of lived experience can forge its own language—which will always be inadequate, and yet which will often have the metaphorical structure of the dream itself. (*BEM* 41)

The similarities with French Freudian analysis become evident when Sartre continues: “Comprehension of a dream occurs when a man can express it in a language which is itself dreamt. Lacan says that the unconscious is structured like a language. I would say that the language which expresses it has the structure of a dream” (*BEM* 41). This is as close as Sartre comes to explicit acceptance of an “unconscious” level of awareness. Indeed, he introduces the term “lived experience” in his Flaubert study as “the equivalent of conscious-unconscious.”²⁴ But the retention of a locus for individual responsibility remains uncompromised.

Sartre repeats that view and elaborates it in an interview given late in life. When asked whether his concept of lived experience does not require that he reconsider his notion of consciousness, since it seems at times to be a reply to the Freudian unconscious, he responds:

It is in some degree a reply to the Freudian unconscious, a way of showing that a host of complex intentions that Freud places in the unconscious can be found in lived experience. That is certainly part of it. It is also the fact that we constantly have in ourselves states that we can understand if we take time, but that we do not understand. These states are full of richness, but they do not yield it. They come and go, there is nothing mysterious about them, nothing unconscious. Simply, they retain and contain in themselves a richness that is undeveloped, that one understands but does not develop.²⁵

Still, he admits a shift of view:

The conception of “lived experience” marks my change since *L’Etre et le néant*. My early work was a rationalist philosophy of consciousness. It was all very well for me to dabble in apparently non-rational processes in the individual, the fact remains that *L’Etre et le néant* is a monument of rationality. But in the end it becomes an irrationalism, because it cannot account rationally for those processes which are “below” consciousness and which are also rational, but lived as irrational. Today, the notion of “lived experience” represents an effort to preserve that presence to itself which seems to me indispensable for the existence of any psychic fact, while

at the same time this presence is so opaque and blind before itself that it is also an absence from itself. Lived experience is always simultaneously present to itself and absent from itself. (*BEM* 41–42)

“Richness,” “opaque and blind before itself,” “processes which are ‘below’ consciousness”—these are some of the features that “the lived” brings to the unblinking eye of existentialist consciousness such that Sartre can speak of “conscious-unconscious” and “presence-absence” without allowing that this compromises his staunch rejection of the Freudian unconscious. Clearly, some distinctions are called for.

The notion of presence-absence has, in fact, been a feature of Sartrean consciousness since his psychological studies in the 1930s. As I noted earlier, imaging consciousness is paradigmatic of consciousness in general for Sartre. Such awareness “derealizes” its object, rendering it “present-absent” to the imaging subject.²⁶ That he should characterize the language of (pre-reflective) comprehension as that of a dream may sound like surrealism minus the unconscious, but it actually elaborates an old Sartrean thesis. The dividedness that makes it possible to comprehend without “knowing” was already present in *Being and Nothingness*. It occurred in the distinction between reflective and *pre*-reflective consciousness. What was lacking in Sartre’s previously epistemic notion of “experience” was what we might call the “existential richness” of the later usage.²⁷ Likewise, he speaks of an *Erlebnis* (using the German but not *le vécu*) of simultaneity.²⁸ In this earlier work, for example, he dismisses our awareness of the “we” as a “purely subjective experience (*Erlebnis*),” having no ontological significance (*BN* 429). It is this wealth that Sartre mines in his multi-volume existential psychoanalysis of Flaubert and his age. Indeed, he once described *The Family Idiot* as a sequel to *The Psychology of Imagination* (*BEM* 46).

Sartre’s point in introducing the category of lived experience is strategic. He wishes to “surpass the traditional psychoanalytic ambiguity of psychic facts which are both teleological and mechanical, by showing that every psychic fact involves an intentionality which aims at something, while among them a certain number can only exist if they are comprehended but neither named nor known” (*BEM* 42). The intentionality of consciousness is preserved, the Freudian mechanical “hydraulic” model is rejected, and, again, individual responsibility is defended. But the defense of responsibility, I have cautioned, seems to require that we distinguish comprehension and lived experience from pre-reflective consciousness as such, a discrimination that Sartre fails explicitly to make in this context.

Now the limit of this presence-absence, in Sartrean vocabulary, is the “self” as “presence-to-self.” Recall Sartre’s assertion that “man is free because he is not a self but a presence-to-self” (*BN* 440; *EN* 516). He describes immanence as “the smallest step back [*recul*] that can be made from self to itself” (*BN* lxx; *EN* 32, trans. changed). Hence, “subjectivity” in *Being and Nothingness* is another word for the impossibility of one’s being an object for oneself: “I am the one who cannot be an object for myself” (*BN* 241). Ontologically speaking, this

“inner distance” is the basis of temporalization. Human reality is temporally extended, which is the reason for the many paradoxical statements that Sartre makes in its regard throughout *Being and Nothingness*. This subject that cannot be an object is, of course, not a transcendental ego as it is for Husserl and Kant. Rather, it is another way of describing the presence-to-self that is the ontological ground for Sartrean freedom and responsibility.²⁹

But that vintage existentialist notion of “subjectivity” changed in Sartre’s later work. By 1969, he insists: “What you call ‘subjectivity’ in *Being and Nothingness* is not what it would be for me now, the small margin in an operation whereby an interiorization re-externalizes itself in an act.” And he continues in a manner that Foucault might find attractive: “But ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ seem to me entirely useless notions today, anyway. I might still use the term ‘objectivity,’ I suppose, but only to emphasize that everything is objective. The individual interiorizes his social determinations: he interiorizes the relations of production, the family of his childhood, the historical past, the contemporary institutions, and he then re-externalizes these in acts and options which necessarily refer us back to them. None of this existed in *L’Être et le néant*” (BEM 35).

Again, if we take Foucault as the model of a style of thought that enters readily into the current century, it would help to observe how his use of “experience” maps on that of Sartre. In summary fashion, let me cite Foucault as one of those recent philosophers of the “return to experience.” Though I cannot do so here, it can be shown that the concept of experience is central to Foucault’s thought from his first major work, *L’Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* to the two volumes of his history of sexuality that appeared just before his death in 1984.³⁰ If this indicates a move beyond structuralism on his part, it is equally indicative of a return to questions of experience among French philosophers generally. Dutch philosopher of history Franklin Ankersmit put the matter rather bluntly in an interview when he confessed: “This obsession with language and discourse has become boring. We’ve been talking about language for almost a hundred years. It’s time to change the subject. Personally I am in favor of the category of *historical experience*.”³¹

Certainly, Foucault’s appeal to “experience” does seem to have a wider extension than either language or discourse. And the concept of experience gives a kind of *unity* to an otherwise disparate set of occurrences. But is that unity merely methodological or is it likewise ontological in nature? In other words, is the final Foucault slipping into categories of being despite himself? And if so, how distant is he now from Sartre’s existential phenomenology? Specifically, how marked is the difference between Sartre’s presence-to-self and Foucault’s “kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor à soi*,” which he calls “ethics”?³²

If contemporary philosophers are skittish about returning to philosophies of consciousness, so too was Sartre, as we have just observed. But the concept of experience, which in Sartre’s hands plays a role both more extensive and more nuanced than the unblinking eye of being-for-itself as consciousness, is another likely locus for existentialist dialogue with contemporary thought.

Thinking the Twenty-first Century

To the extent that existentialism reflects the experience of Western Europe in the 1940s, it seems inextricably tied to its own facticity. As Sartre liked to quote from Hegel, its essence is its history (*Das Wesen ist was gewesen ist*). But to the extent that it addresses the human condition (of situation, choice, mortal temporality, and the like), its relevance transcends the historical values one attaches to these variables. The drama may shift with the dramatis personae, but what historian Paul Veyne calls the “plot” (*l'intrigue*) remains the same: people trying to make sense of an increasingly complex, threatening, and impersonal world.

And so I shall close with five existentialist “themes” that, in addition to the concept of experience, promise to remain relevant in the present century. Though these can merely be cited as we conclude, they raise material for subsequent discussion as they point toward the continued philosophical relevance of existentialist thought.

First, I would mention the Sartrean concepts of *presence-to-self* and *being-in-situation*. The former breaks open the Cartesian subject, desubstantializing and thoroughly temporalizing it. The latter relates the subject essentially to its material and cultural history through the dialectic of the given and the taken in any situation. This invites a dialectic of interiorization/exteriorization that is best understood by appeal to praxis rather than to consciousness. It seriously tempers the notion of a meaning-giving, “sovereign” subject, which Foucault so strenuously resisted when he insisted: “I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere. I am very skeptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty, as in Antiquity, on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment.”³³ This last remark is redolent of Sartre’s well-known assertion that we are free, but “only in situation.” But again, Sartre has the advantage of the quasi-Hegelian dialectic, whereas Foucault is limited to a seemingly endless series of reciprocal relations—limited, that is, to what we might call a “Kierkegaardian” dialectic (one without “mediation”). The nature of dialectical thought, though problematized especially by so-called poststructuralists, remains a crucial issue.

The second, abiding existentialist theme is that of *committed* knowledge—specifically, the concepts of committed literature, philosophy, and history. Again, this simply restates objections against the positivist claim to value-free knowledge and to what Peter Novik calls “That Noble Dream” in a book by that title describing the ideal of historical “objectivity.”³⁴ This is scarcely an exclusively twentieth-century question, let alone one mired in the nineteenth century.³⁵

Thirdly, we must consider *authenticity*, often described as the sole existentialist virtue. And here I am pleased to underscore the important work that Ronald Santoni has done on this and the related questions of good and bad faith. This cluster of concepts has become virtually synonymous with Sartrean existentialism. That an admittedly non-existentialist thinker of the stature of

Charles Taylor could underscore the importance of “authenticity” in contemporary ethical discussions is testimony to its abiding and general relevance.³⁶

The fourth, related notion of *responsibility* is both a Sartrean hallmark and a recurrent topic in contemporary ethics. Indeed, so-called postmodernist ethics is primarily an ethics of responsibility, and its propelling of Emmanuel Levinas to center stage, I would suggest, renders implicit homage to the Sartrean ethics that haunts this discourse, waiting to be revived as the context becomes more secular.³⁷

Finally, and in a sense that encompasses the other themes, existentialism is primarily a *way of life*, a form of what the Greeks called “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*). This has always been admitted. In fact, it was occasionally cited as one of existentialism’s limitations. But the revival of interest in philosophy as a way of life, encouraged in part by renewed interest in Hellenistic ethics and in part by the writings and lectures of Foucault and Hellenist Pierre Hadot,³⁸ brings this defining feature of existentialism to the fore. If I may refer to Sartre’s quasi-antagonist one last time, the Louvain philosopher, Rudi Visker, toward the end of a book-length study of Foucault and phenomenology, raises the question of a “kind of *existentialization of Foucault*,” to which he responds, “And why not?”³⁹

So in addition to the inevitable tributes, conferences, anthologies, and the like that celebrate Sartre’s centenary in 2005, let us recognize that the thought of Sartre remains as present and as vital as the human condition, *our* condition, which it analyzes and challenges us to own.

Notes

1. Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 330.
2. Michel Foucault, “La vie: l’expérience et la science,” *Dits et écrits*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald with the collaboration of Jacques Lagrange, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 4:764; hereafter cited *DE*, with volume and page number.
3. Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time* and *The Facts*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Mjoulie Boutang (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 176. Shortly after, in the same text Althusser describes Sartre as one who “who resembled Voltaire as a philosophical novelist but had the personal intransigence of Rousseau” (178).
4. Robert Redeker, “La dernière peau philosophique de Michel Foucault,” *Critique* 660 (May 2002): 392.
5. Allusion to a comedy skit on a popular British television show in the 1960s.
6. Michel Foucault, “The Death of Lacan,” in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 58.
7. Michel Foucault, interview in 1966 with C. Bonnefoy, *DE* 1:541–542.
8. These are the dates cited in the collections of these lectures in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations*, vols. 1–10 (Paris: Gallimard, 1947–1976), 8:455; hereafter cited *Situations*, with volume and page number. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka date them exactly one year later, probably a typographical error. See Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds., *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, 2 vols. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 1:486.

9. *Situations* 8:375–455; “A Plea for Intellectuals,” in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathews (New York: William Morrow, 1974), 228–285; hereafter cited *BEM*.
10. The lecture had been delivered in May 1964. As Stone and Bowman point out, the composition of the Rome Lecture, as it is called, began in 1961. See Robert Stone and Elizabeth Bowman, “Dialectical Ethics: A First Look at Sartre’s Unpublished 1964 Rome Lecture Notes,” *Social Text* 13–14 (Winter–Spring 1986): 195–215.
11. *DE* 4:24.
12. See Stone and Bowman, “Dialectical Ethics.”
13. See Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 34ff.; hereafter cited *SME*.
14. See *SME* 4–5, 35, 41, 187.
15. *Situations* 8:399; *BEM* 246.
16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1968), 34.
17. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 407; hereafter cited *NE*.
18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 2, *The Intelligibility of History*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1991), 221.
19. For an account of Sartre’s understanding of “conversion,” see the brief remarks of his adopted daughter Arlette Elkaim-Sartre in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Truth and Existence*, trans. Adrian van den Hoven (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 83n1.
20. See Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason*, vol. 1, *Toward an Existentialist Theory of History*, and vol. 2, *A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997 and 2005 respectively), 1:147; hereafter cited *SFHR*, with volume and page number.
21. See *SFHR* 1:75, 125ff., and *SME* 104.
22. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), 74.
23. I discuss the ability of ideology to dim the clarity of Sartrean consciousness in *SME* 110, 132–133, and 234n18.
24. “Which is to say that I no longer [*sic*] believe in certain forms of the unconscious even though Lacan’s conception of the unconscious is more interesting.... I want to give the idea of a whole whose surface is completely conscious, while the rest is opaque to this consciousness and, without being part of the unconscious, is hidden from you. When I show how Flaubert did not know himself and how at the same time he understood himself admirably, I am indicating what I call lived experience (*le vécu*)—that is to say, life aware of itself, without implying anythetic knowledge or [thetic] consciousness. This notion of lived experience is a tool I use, but one which I have not yet theorized” (interview, “On *The Idiot of the Family*,” in *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*, trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis [New York: Pantheon Books, 1977], 127–128; *Situations* 10:110).
25. “Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre,” in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1981), 22.
26. See *SFHR* 1:214–215, as well as Thomas R. Flynn, “The Role of the Image in Sartre’s Aesthetic,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (Summer 1975): 431–442.
27. Admittedly, Sartre’s notion of “preontological comprehension” was already quite broad in *Being and Nothingness*. There he speaks of a preontological comprehension of being (17), of non-being (7), of the futility of “sincerity” (63), of the criteria of truth (156), of the existence of the Other (251), of human reality (561), of the human person (568), and of one’s fundamental project (570).
28. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 140; *L’Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943); hereafter cited *BN* and *EN*, respectively.
29. See *SME* 9–13.

30. See chap. 9, “Experience and the Lived,” in *SFHR*, vol. 2, *A Poststructuralist Mapping of History*. In order to clarify better the contrast between Sartre and Foucault on the question of historical intelligibility, it was my original intention to entitle the two-volume study, “The Diary and the Map.”
31. Quoted in Ewa Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 262.
32. Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), 263.
33. Michel Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1998), 50–51.
34. Peter Novik, *The Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
35. See Thomas R. Flynn, “Committed History,” in *The Ethics of History*, ed. David Carr, Thomas R. Flynn, and Rudolf Makkreel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 230–246.
36. See Ronald E. Santoni, *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre’s Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), and Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
37. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), and Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978).
38. See, for example, *SFHR*, vol. 2, chap. 11, “Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at Collège de France,” and Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. and intro. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
39. Rudi Visker, *Truth and Singularity: Taking Foucault into Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 376.