

Thomas R. Flynn. *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography*. Cambridge University Press 2014. 448 pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780521826402).

Like most great thinkers, Jean-Paul Sartre changed his mind. What is remarkable about Sartre though, is that the revisions he made to his philosophy seem so radical that scholars have felt driven to consider him host to two, or even three, separate thinkers. Despite Sartre's assurance that he 'changed like everyone: within a permanence' (377), the task of tracing the evolution of his philosophical thought 'within a permanence' is gargantuan. This is not only due to the enormity of Sartre's oeuvre, but also to the diversity of the texts it contains, which reflect the fact that Sartre was a theoretical philosopher *and* a political activist, an ethicist, a playwright, a literary author, a biographer, and a public figure. Complicating matters further is the fact that so many of Sartre's notes and manuscripts, written at different stages in his career, were published posthumously.

Though previous studies on Sartre may indicate when he was working on which projects, they tend only to track the publication dates and this makes it difficult to trace the progression of his thought. Undoubtedly, this has motivated Flynn's decision to provide a map of Sartre's 'intellectual development' (dust-jacket), which surveys his works in the order he produced them. This alone makes *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* an essential reference for anyone studying Sartre, but it is not the only reason why this work is important. What Flynn writes of his exposition of *Being and Nothingness* in Chapter 7 extends to the rest of this book; it's 'intention is to underscore what is distinctively Sartrean' (176-7). While Sartre was greatly inspired by thinkers like Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and (more than he admitted) Freud, Flynn continually demonstrates how he was by no means a 'slavish commentator' (75), but someone who developed the thought of his predecessors and made original contributions to philosophy.

This biography is divided into fifteen chapters, each with helpful subheadings; yet, it reads like a narrative. By tracing how the patterns and *motifs* in Sartre's thought reaffirm, support, and sometimes contradict one another, this book, rather than presenting static, irreconcilable 'Sartres,' describes Sartre *the thinker* as a dynamic movement through time. As such, Flynn's latest book is more of a *totalization* than a collection of parts and the best way to give a sense of it is to consider some of its themes.

Fundamental importance is ascribed to the dualism within Sartre's monism. Although Sartre rejects Cartesian substance dualism, Flynn identifies a 'duality operative in his writings': one of *spontaneity* and *inertia* (154). This dyad is apparent in Sartre's early distinction between being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*) and being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and becomes reinterpreted as 'praxis and pratico-inert' in his later system (340). A 'driving force of Sartre's philosophical life' was the desire to overcome the explanatory gaps that haunted philosophy since Descartes and to regain 'access to concrete reality' (326). The notion of 'intentionality' Sartre first discovered in Husserl's phenomenology provided him with a means of resisting the kind of epistemology that can only *know* by digesting; that is, by reducing the 'tables, rocks and trees of our experience' to 'contents of consciousness' (62), rather than recognizing them as 'irreducibly other than our consciousness' (63). Intentionality allowed Sartre to shift all objects of consciousness, and consciousness itself *outside* (the 'mind'), and Flynn highlights the enduring significance of this notion for Sartre, 'not merely a[s] defining characteristic of consciousness and a bulwark of epistemological realism,' but also for its 'ontological role in warranting the transphenomenal character of the phenomenon itself' (180).

Flynn maintains another distinction, between *sense* and *signification*, also 'lends a unity and

a coherence to Sartre's thought that survives the transformations and displacements required for his evolution from existential phenomenologist to 'materialist dialectician,' primarily because it allows him to separate 'lived' comprehension from 'conceptual meaning' (253). Comprehension (of *sense*), in Sartre's terminology, translates as 'pre-ontological' (176), or 'pre-reflective' awareness (102), which is vital to grasping the truth of reality. For Sartre, comprehension is also what allows us to understand an 'Other's goal or purpose' (268), and this notion gains additional importance in Sartre's later theory 'where it is called upon to skirt the negative character' of his account of being-for-others (*être-pour-autrui*) (206). An excellent exposition of the ontological role of 'shame' before an Other in Chapter 8, defends Sartre against Heidegger's criticism that *Being and Nothingness* is 'at most a philosophical psychology', not a 'fundamental ontology' (175), since in Sartre's account of *The Look* (*Le Regard*), the 'experience of the Other as subject is as certain as my experience of shame' (209). However, this is also the source of a critical weakness in Sartre's ontology, which can provide a basis for the 'interpersonal' but not the 'social' (208).

Sartre's failures prove to be equally—if not more—telling than his successes. Notably, his three failed attempts to produce an ethics, consistent with his 'ideals of 'Socialism and Freedom' (410), are connected to the tension that results from Sartre's commitment to his ontological (and individualist) account of freedom and his view that 'the motor of history is scarcity' (341), a tension which Flynn characterizes as "'fraternity" verses "terror"' (380). Sartre's 'ethic of a "We"', like his social ontology, proves to be ultimately inhibited by his fundamental understanding of 'we' as 'plural rather than singular' (378).

A continual refusal to push the free individual into the background renders any kind of determinism unacceptable for Sartre, and his denial of causes in (human) history makes his interpretations of both psychoanalysis and Marxism 'distinctively Sartrean'. Sartre's existential psychoanalysis explicitly rejects the notion of the unconscious. Nonetheless, Flynn reveals that the gradual clouding of 'unblinking eye' of Sartre's consciousness (339) coincides with his growing appreciation of the 'force of circumstance' (276). A delicate exposition of *Anti-Semite and Jew* in chapter 9 explains why Sartre's engagement with this difficult topic was 'essential' to his 'sense of the historical dimension of any concrete existence' (390). Sartre looked to Marxism for assistance in capturing this historical dimension, and the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* can be viewed as his response to contemporary Marxist-structuralist accounts of history that, he believed, failed to appreciate 'the epistemic, ontological and moral primacy of the free organic individual' (333). For Flynn, Sartre's example of the boxing match in this text provides an 'object lesson in the intelligibility of History' (347), through which Sartre describes how the dimension of the real—which would be missing in an 'ordinary' analysis of this event—can be preserved through a dialectical comprehension of 'this particular event on this boxing card held in this arena on this evening' (348). Sartre's eventual 'combination of historical materialism and existential psychoanalysis' which 'demands that we 'concretize' (incarnate) the formal abstractions' (351), finds its fullest expression in *The Family Idiot* (a three-volume, biographical study on the author, Gustave Flaubert). Flynn is sensitive to the multifarious means by which Sartre presented his ideas and argues this, often overlooked, 'novel which is true' (408), represents 'a summation of his metaphysical, aesthetic, political and ethical pursuits' (383). Illuminating connections are drawn between Sartre's treatise on *The Imaginary* and this final work, in which Sartre employs the faculty of the imagination to discover 'what we can know about a man nowadays' (408).

It is a pity that Flynn devotes more space to a critical exploration of *Being and Nothingness*

than he does to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and *The Family Idiot* together. Though his discussion of the former is valuable, most of his readers are likely to be familiar with this text and the vast amount of secondary literature on it. They are far less likely, however, to have a thorough understanding of these later, less popular texts. Though Flynn has provided an in-depth analysis of the *Critique* elsewhere (in *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason: Toward an Existentialist Theory of History*), this makes his somewhat brief summaries of these later works here more regrettable because he is so well-placed to provide an authoritative investigation of them.

Notwithstanding this, Flynn has managed to condense an immensely comprehensive totalization into a neat, one-volume narrative, and *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* is undeniably an incredibly accomplished piece of scholarship. It is not, however, an introduction to Sartre; although it explains the changes in Sartre's often rather heavily-loaded terminology, it works on the assumption that its reader is already familiar with the fundamental aspects Sartre's philosophy. This biography is also a scholarly reference work; it does not delve into great detail on Sartre's private life, unless the connection to his philosophy is clear. Sartre's experiment with the hallucinogenic drug mescaline, for example, is mentioned due to its obvious relevance to *The Imaginary* and *Nausea*, but the 'emotional turmoil' Sartre was going through at the same time is passed over swiftly, with the remark that 'perhaps as a way of taming it, Sartre managed to work on his "factum" on contingency and, more immediately, on his psychological studies of the emotions and the imaginary realm' (94). Readers more interested in the personality of Sartre will find greater satisfaction in reading Simone de Beauvoir's accounts of her life with Sartre or Ronald Hayman's *Writing Against: A Biography of Sartre*.

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